

Student Article

Reflections on being a student: A home and international perspective

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In this reflective article, I outline my journey as a student from France who moved through a number of learning institutions abroad, to question the essentialism of the concepts of ‘international student’ and ‘international student experience’. I describe how I came to regard myself as a ‘professional international student’ while paradoxically incorporating elements of both the ‘home’ and ‘international’ student identity. I also give an account of some of the challenges encountered at different stages in my learning journey to compare the ‘home’ and ‘international’ experience and examine whether it is ‘harder’ to be an international student.

Becoming the ‘professional international student’

In France, students often stay close to home to complete their undergraduate studies, and I proceeded as such when I enrolled at the University of Grenoble in 2004. Three years later, I applied to finish my undergraduate degree at the University of Edinburgh as part of the Erasmus exchange programme, and in so doing, kick-started my career as a ‘professional international student’. I found the experience challenging but extremely rewarding and did not want to return to France and the French Higher Education (HE) system after this first taste of the international lifestyle. Thus, I chose to complete my postgraduate studies at the University of Jyväskylä, in Finland, a choice based on the specific programme for which I applied – uniquely combining the fields of development studies and education – as well as my curiosity for the Scandinavian countries. Yet, to secure a place on this competitive programme, I had to gain further work experience and academic qualifications, for which I travelled to Ireland, Spain, Peru, England and Scotland.

As a result of this learning journey across the HE systems of seven different countries, I like to call myself a ‘professional international student’. I use this phrase to refer to the knowledge and understanding of HE culture as context-specific and the variations encountered from one setting to the next, along with the diverse skills required to navigate the society in which the HE institution is situated.

Upon graduating from the University of Jyväskylä, I applied for a position at Edinburgh Napier University assisting on projects investigating international student support. Arriving for the interview, I could not help but chuckle when I handed my diplomas which looked like the stamps on my passport. Was it my first-hand experience of the diversity of educational systems that gave me the edge? All I know is that I got the job, along with the opportunity to research the very phenomenon about which I had become so familiar and passionate.

Home or international?

After working as a research assistant, I decided to undertake my doctoral studies and moved to Glasgow where I am currently attending the University of Strathclyde. Nevertheless, I had spent a lot of time with international students and the literature on international transitions, which left me wondering about my own status and identity. Am I an international or a home student now? Indeed, I can fit in either category – both in terms of conceptual definition and lived experience.

In the literal sense, I am an international student -I am a French citizen and I study in the UK. This was clearly registered by the University judging by the ‘EU and International Update’ emails I frequently receive. However, I am a home student as per my stipend and tuition fee status, a privilege granted to me on the basis of my French nationality –a European Union country- in combination with the fact that I had lived in the UK for over three years prior to my application. Furthermore, in Biggs (2003), international students are defined as those students who have moved to a different country to study. According to this description, I obviously qualified as an international student when I first came to the UK in 2007. But how about now that I am doing my doctoral studies? Am I still an international student as per my initial move from France, or am I a home student due to my more recent move from Edinburgh to Glasgow?

My everyday experience of studying in Glasgow also challenges the bounded and fixed divide between home and international student. In fact, I feel like a home student in my ability to navigate the Scottish culture: for instance, I know how to ask for help in the street, which ones are the best music venues and the good bands, I understand the Glaswegian accent (mostly), how to register with a GP – and what a GP is. I often feel like any other home student who moved away to study, as I did myself from the East Coast to the West Coast of Scotland. But on many occasions, I am reminded that I am not British, nor am I a home student – and for more reasons than my obvious French accent.

Indeed, I got pregnant shortly after moving to Glasgow, and became acutely aware of how uninformed and foreign I still am, even after all these years in the UK. Dictionary and telephone in hand, I painfully figured out the English names for baby clothes and equipment, the childcare possibilities in the UK, the workings of the NHS –all specific to the British context. In addition, I experienced feelings of homesickness, loneliness and being lost, as when I first moved over ten years before. As a result, I have sometimes identified as a home student, other times as international. In some ways, I consider myself as a ‘hybrid’ nowadays, the ‘local international student’ if such a creature exists.

Comparing the home and the international and student experience

Identifying groups of students in terms of the characteristics they share or which differentiate them from others allows us to research them and devise specific provision adapted to their circumstances. International students are presented in the literature as a group facing additional and specific obstacles to their academic success, for instance at the linguistic and sociocultural levels, so that the international student experience is often depicted as somehow more challenging (Ecochard and Fotheringham, 2017). Yet, I wonder how pertinent it is to portray experience in such a way, implying the possibility of comparison and measure. To examine this point, I will briefly outline some of the tests I met at different stages in my student journey.

My time as a home student in France was a lot about learning to bear the pressure of studying. I had to learn to be a student, to live away from home by myself for the first time, while juggling classes and the stress of exams, as well as the frequent changes in rhythm throughout the year that accompany the student lifestyle. When I moved to Scotland, I

became estranged from my family and I had to pursue my studies without any emotional support from that quarter, while worrying about my finances and my mental health. At the same time, I was acquiring the level of English and the academic skills required to keep up with reading in a foreign language and to write essays. Finally, returning to University as a doctoral (and pregnant) student, I had to look for a flat in a different city while still being in employment, I then moved and made a new social network at an age when I am finding it more difficult, I figured my way around a new university in all its specificities, such as its modes of assessment and online environments. In addition, due to my pregnancy, I have often found myself quite tired and facing a number of physical ailments.

In conclusion, becoming the ‘professional international student’ led me to question the essentialist divide between ‘home’ and ‘international’ student experiences and to view instead each learning journey as comprising its own unique set of challenges. In my case, as the academic requirements progressed steadily, so did my ability to handle the pressure and the different learning environments. While I did clearly notice the differences inherent in each HE system, they were not necessarily the striking features of my learning journey. Therefore, rather than identify as a home or international student, I would perhaps recognise myself as pertaining to the ‘anxious learner’ category as, for me, my personal and emotional landscape often predominated over the institutional one.

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